
School and Public Library Collaboration: A Phenomenology of Working Together

Jenna Kammer & Denise Moreland
University of Central Missouri, USA

Collaboration between school and public librarians has many benefits for the institutions, the communities they serve, and the librarians themselves. This study sought to understand more about the librarian's experience of collaborating in a rural area of the Midwestern United States. Using phenomenology as a research method, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with school and public librarians. The following themes emerged: (1) the meaning of collaboration, (2) the role of communication, (3) the dilemma of demonstrating value and (4) the impact of perceptions and limitations. The findings indicate that the librarians in this study want to work together more but are impacted by systematic and regional constraints that impact the depth and frequency of collaboration.

Introduction

Collaboration between institutions is considered a solution for many libraries who seek to serve growing populations with small budgets (Smith, 2014). The public librarian may seek connection with the school community to promote programs or resources, and the school librarian may seek connections with the public libraries to connect students or teachers with library services or develop strategies for improving student achievement. Studies on school and public library collaboration have long established that these two institutions share a similar mission and have many reasons to work together (Fitzgibbons, 1989, 2001; Kelley, 1992). Particularly in rural areas where budgets are smaller, collaboration can be extremely beneficial and expand access to resources and services for the community.

Most of the published literature related to school and public collaboration describes how the school and public librarians can work together to combine or share services or resources, while little is written about the actual experience of the librarians who collaborate. This is significant because collaboration is not easy: there are often many barriers that prevent or limit collaboration from developing at greater depths like lack of communication (Smith, 2014) and lack of time (Collen, 2013). Both Smith and Collen conducted survey research to understand more about how school and public librarians form partnerships, but more in-depth research into the experience of collaborating is needed. Exploring the phenomena of collaboration between the school and the public library is an important part of identifying how these partnerships can work more effectively.

In this study, we explored school and public librarian collaboration from the perspective of the librarians themselves. Through in-depth interviewing, the experience of collaboration between school and public librarians in the rural Midwest of the United States was examined for similarities and differences between each participant. Considering that most librarians, both school and public,

are trained in library science, the experience of collaborating with another librarian outside of the institution should be a natural partnership. However, the reality is that while school and public librarians both understand and value collaboration, there are many systematic challenges to sustaining these partnerships. Talking to experienced school and public librarians about their collaborative efforts, or desires to collaborate more, provided insight into the experience of collaboration in rural areas, as well as the experience of school and public library collaboration in general.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do school and public librarians in a rural Midwestern region experience collaboration?
2. How do school and public librarians in a rural Midwestern region describe their collaborative experiences?
3. What are the similarities and differences between school and public librarians when describing collaboration?

Literature Review

Librarians and Collaborative Partnerships

Collaboration is a term that is broadly used in library literature to describe cooperative relationships between two parties. For example, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *National School Library Standards* (2018) described collaboration as a Shared Foundations (Collaborate) and explained that collaboration means to “work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work towards common goals” (p. 86). However, much of what is described as collaboration, is actually cooperation or coordination. True collaboration often involves a greater partnership where the collaborators work towards shared or unique goals (Mattesich & Monsey, 1992). The definition of collaboration from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2019) stated that collaboration can indeed include cooperation, or any targeted effort to work jointly between institutions. In this paper, we use this broad definition of collaboration to represent collaboration between school and public librarians, with the hopes of uncovering more about how the librarians themselves define collaboration.

Among school librarians, collaboration includes a variety of levels of collaboration as is common in instructional partnerships. Montiel-Overall (2010) presented four levels of collaboration that can occur between the teacher and the school librarian including coordination, cooperation and partnerships, integrated instruction and integrated curriculum. For school librarians, school and public library collaboration is slightly different than collaborating with teachers who are both working towards student achievement. When librarians collaborate across institutions, they collaborate as community partners. Howard et al. (2018) explained that this type of collaboration requires regular communication with counterparts at each institution, communications with colleagues within the institution about the collaboration, and a general openness to learn about what is happening within each library. As a result, one-on-one partnerships, cooperative programs or collaborative projects at the building, district or system level can emerge.

While Montiel-Overall’s (2010) model of collaboration could be applied to collaboration across libraries, there are other models that are also adequate for examining community partnerships. Specifically, Giesecke (2012) explained that succeeding at long-term collaboration

between libraries may require a deeper level of partnership than simply coordinating and cooperating. Libraries often work together at the coordination and cooperation levels. Instead, Giesecke (2012) recommended that libraries consider forming partnerships to ensure a sustained business alliance using the Gallup approach. The Gallup approach outlines seven factors for successful partnerships: a common mission, fairness, trust, acceptance, forgiveness, communication, and unselfishness (Wagner & Muller, 2009). These factors ensure that the partnership aspects of a collaboration go well.

Successful and sustained collaborative partnerships may be impacted by organizational culture. Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker (2014) established that organizational culture was a critical component to the success of partnerships between librarians. For example, if the culture within one library is to collaborate or partner, those skills, like communication, developing good working relationships and making time to collaborate, will transfer to collaborative partnerships that occur outside of the library. In addition, Sarjeant-Jenkins and Walker (2014) found that all participants who had successful collaborative partnerships referenced support from the leader of their organization in some regard. Giesecke (2012) also explained that organizational culture is a factor in the success of collaborative partnerships and suggested that librarians consider when to form a partnership carefully (as not all interactions require partnering).

To understand how librarians feel about collaboration, it is important to consider how they collaborate within their work. School librarians are often former classroom teachers, hold certification as a school librarian or have a graduate degree in library science (AASL, 2010). Because of a background in teaching or education coursework, school librarians learn about collaboration while training for their careers. Vangrieken et al. (2015) explained that collaboration is an essential skill for teachers to successfully perform their job and many teacher education programs will emphasize this. In addition, collaboration between teachers can happen in teams, groups or as part of professional learning communities (PLC) or communities of practice (CoP). In a literature review of research on teacher collaboration, Vangrieken, et al (2015) found that the majority of teacher collaboration happens between teachers who teach within the same grade level, and will often be inter-disciplinary. In addition, teachers often see the benefits of collaboration as improving student success and performance outcomes. For the teachers themselves, the benefits are vast: teachers find that collaboration can make teaching more efficient, increase teacher efficacy, improve awareness and enjoyment, to name a few.

On the other hand, public librarians often work with a variety of other community organizations to deliver services as needed within the community. Some public libraries have a position dedicated specifically to outreach. Norman (2013) explained that public libraries might use an accounting model to determine if the costs of a library service could be supplied by others in the community. This has resulted in collaborations with library consortiums for library management systems, outsourcing of library materials selection and end-processing services. Public libraries may also work with other organizations to meet niche collection needs (e.g., graphic novels, homeschool, testing, or English-language collections). Collaborating with schools or other youth services in the community is another type of outreach that happens in public libraries. Martinez (2008) explained that the public library works with families, so family, school and community partnerships are one way that public librarians can help students succeed in school.

School and Public Library Collaboration

Collaboration between libraries is different than collaborating with other educators within a single school. Many school and public libraries are not located near each other, and school and public librarians may never see each other. In addition, the school library is focused on supporting the curriculum needs of students and teachers within their school, while the public library meets the information needs of the entire community. It should be noted that the students and teachers within a school are also part of the public library's community of users, while the general public is not necessarily part of a school library's community of users. Despite these differences, school and public libraries exist within one community and serve the same patrons. Fenwick (1960) described that this is one reason that school and public library relationships are important:

"For however poor communication is between the two types of libraries in any given community, there is one point at which they meet, and that is in the experience of the young people themselves with library resources. The school librarian may never set foot inside the public library, and the public librarian may never visit the school, but at least one-third of the youth in the community know how to use the resources and services of both..." (p. 63).

With this in mind, Fenwick explained that developing harmonious relationships between the school and the public library is natural for the people in the community who may be involved in both institutions. For example, a fourth grader may go to their school library during the day, then visit the public library after school.

School and public libraries collaborate in many ways. *The Public Library/School Library Collaboration Toolkit* was developed through a partnership between several professional library organizations. This guide explained that school and public librarians should work together, and provided many examples for ways in which they could collaborate including providing summer reading and learning programs, partnering to improve digital literacy, conducting career or college preparation events, or even simply sharing resources (Howard, et al., 2018). Murdoch (2013) also shared that public libraries often have more resources than a school district would, and can fill gaps in school library collections. Enabling access through programming like "The Library Cards for Educators and Schools" program makes it possible for schools to have a library card that connects them with digital resources is one way to share resources (ALSC, n.d.). Others recommend that libraries consider reviewing resources, or collaboratively plan acquisitions (Smith, 2014).

All librarians are encouraged by their professional organizations to collaborate; however, collaboration requires a personal commitment or interest to ensure it happens. Attitudes towards collaboration and an interest in collaborating are critical. For example, Brown (2004) found that attitude towards collaboration were especially significant in successful collaborative relationships. The more that each party believed in the value of collaboration, the more successful it was. Wepking (2009) also explained that librarians should have the desire to willingly work with other libraries for the benefit of the people they serve. Librarians are motivated to collaborate to increase value for their patrons or students, but also to improve their own job satisfaction. When librarians collaborate, they create friendships, inspire new ideas, and provide support for each other when it is needed (Pandora & Hayman, 2013). Lastly, collaboration can help secure the support needed for resources, such as funding, materials, space, equipment, staff and programming.

Developing professional relationships is a major benefit for librarians who collaborate. In collaborative partnerships, new friendships can be made. Librarians in collaborative partnerships share ideas and frustrations while also sharing understanding about the different nuances of what it is like to work in a library (Pandora & Hayman, 2013). Librarians can discuss new ideas with each other before implementing them. Each librarian may have things they are good at doing and things they are not so good at doing. They can support each other by sharing their expertise to help where it is needed and become advocates for each other. The school librarian could promote the public

library's services and resources, while the public librarian could bring resources and services to the schools to support the literacy objectives (Pandora & Hayman, 2013). Pandora and Hayman described how learning from each other improved how they serve the students. For example, the school librarian has experience seeing and understanding how students learn, which could help the public librarian teach a how-to class. The public librarian knows what children from many different schools read for pleasure and could share this with school librarians. School librarians know what books are popular within their own schools and can share this with public librarians.

School and Public Library Collaboration in Rural Areas

There has been limited research relating to school and public librarian collaboration in rural areas. Smith (2014) explained how children in rural areas have higher dropout rates, are less likely to enroll in college and will have lower scores on standardized tests than children from suburban areas. Smith surveyed 88 public librarians from a rural area to ask them about how they collaborate with school libraries. Most of them agreed that collaboration would be beneficial to their community. Smith found that there were 18 ways in which the public librarians collaborated, but mostly included enrolling students in summer reading programs, and informing school librarians of library programming and changes in programs. There were very few who shared resources or programming, provided homework help, cooperatively reviewed materials, or other deeper levels of collaboration. Smith concluded that school and public libraries in rural areas were collaborating, but not at the depth in which they could.

Martinez (2008) presented several case studies of public library outreach in rural areas of the United States (Wicomico County and Carroll County, Maryland). In both cases, the librarians included the school in their outreach programs by visiting the school in the bookmobile to distribute resources, give book talks, offer story time or distribute programming fliers. However, the school was just one visit of many; public librarians also went to doctor's offices, Head Start programs, daycares and senior centers.

Collen (2013) published the results of a survey conducted in Illinois through the Illinois Library Association about the status of the school and public library partnerships within the state. Almost all respondents indicated that the public library provides some services to the schools in their area, including summer reading, access to databases or library cards and homework help. However, rural areas of Illinois were particularly challenged in that some students within one school district might live in an unincorporated or out-of-district area which did not receive public library services. This was a concern for both school and public librarians who knew that when presenting public library services to students, some would not be able to use them. In addition, leadership from both libraries (a school superintendent or a public library director), were often unaware of the value of the other library or failed to follow up on communication to establish collaborative partnerships.

Method

This study uses phenomenology as a research method to study the experience of school and public library collaboration. Phenomenology is the study of the human experience, and the way something is presented by an individual as seen through the human experience (Sokolowski, 2000). Husserl (2017) explained that it is critical to understand the structure of one's consciousness in order to understand why one might act on their consciousness. Husserl's work (originating in the mid 1900's and then reprinted in 2017) influenced a broader study of phenomenology, often with criticism that it is impossible to reduce a participant's experience fully and instead requires a more interpretive

approach. Thus, the study of phenomenology is more of a study in intentionality: a psychological approach to understanding a phenomenon, and how people experience it. Specifically, Sokolowski (2000) explained that phenomenology is a transition from the natural attitude to a phenomenological viewpoint. The natural attitude is “the default perspective, the one we start from, the one we are in originally” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 42). The phenomenological viewpoint is “the focus we have when we reflect upon the natural attitude and all the intentionality that occur within it” (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 42). It is the lived experience, or how the participant feels and perceives the phenomena, that is sought in a phenomenological study.

As a research method, phenomenology is flexible and can be adapted within a discipline or for a specific research problem (Wertz et al., 2011). Many philosophers (e.g., Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990) have adapted the phenomenological tradition to study lived experience. The study in this paper applies the phenomenological research methods constructed by Giorgi (2009) who explained the connections between phenomenology and practice: there is a connection between how we think and how we act.

Phenomenology provided a method for understanding more about a librarian’s experience of collaboration within the system in which they experienced it. Bossaller (2018) explained that phenomenology is best designed for this type of inquiry; those within a system can provide insight into what is working and what is not. Other types of methods may be better for understanding the details of what the librarians do to collaborate. Through in-depth interviewing with participants, we gathered the participants perspective as much as possible. Participants were asked to relive the experience of collaborating with the other type of librarian, rather than reflecting on the past or future of collaboration. A structured set of interview questions were used to guide the responses, but were followed up with questions that would allow participants to elaborate on the feelings, experiences and thoughts that they had during the experience. We then drew out what it was like to experience the phenomena by asking follow up questions. The results were analyzed amongst each group of librarians as a whole (all school librarian transcripts were analyzed, then all public librarian transcripts were analyzed). An analytic procedure was used involving multiple phases of extracting meaning. The meaning was differentiated to identify what was most relevant to the research.

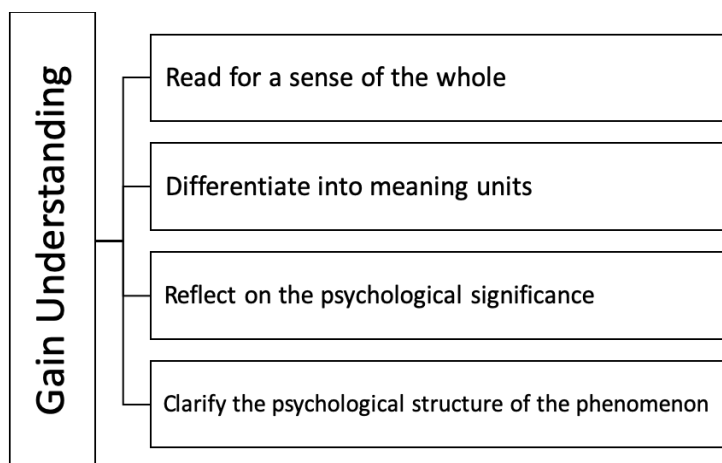


Figure 1. The procedures of the phenomenological method (adapted from Giorgi, 2009).

As Figure 1 shows, the phenomenological method involves a whole-part analysis to help the researcher understand the phenomena (Giorgi, 2009). First, the researcher will read all of the data to familiarize themselves with the content. Then, the data is reread to determine which content can be connected together (also referred to as forming meaning units). Within those units, the researcher

reflects on the significance of the experience that the speaker has conveyed. Finally, the researcher uses expressions to reduce the experience into a structure that can describe the speaker's understanding and knowledge of a phenomena.

Participants

The principal criterion for inclusion in this study was to have current or past employment in a rural school library within a specified region in the Midwest. Researchers identified the region, then selected institutions that met the criteria and invited current librarians to participate. In some cases, a retired school librarian was recommended by another school librarian because of specific experiences with the topic. Participants were recruited through email or phone calls. The study was approved by the human subject's board at the University of Central Missouri and all participants were given a consent form and indicated their willingness to participate by setting up an interview by phone or in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Otter transcription service. Twelve school librarians and eight public librarians (N=20) from seven different counties in one state in the Midwest, met the criteria and chose to participate. Interviews with school librarians lasted between seven and 88 minutes (with an average of 34 minutes). Interviews with public librarians lasted between 40 and 120 minutes (with an average of 45 minutes). Over 950 minutes of interviews were collected.

In this region, the public librarian is often the only librarian who works in the building. The public librarian may be considered a director, or simply the librarian of the building. There may be library assistants, but there was likely just one librarian in each building. The school librarian may also be the only librarian in one building, or may work between multiple buildings. There may be other librarians for different level of schools (high school librarian or elementary librarian). Some school librarians in this study worked with all of the grade levels in their district. They often reported to the principal or a library coordinator within the school district. Of the public librarians in this study, 50% had graduate degrees in library science. Of the school librarians in this study, 70% had graduate degrees in library science.

Summary of Findings

The following text presents the descriptions of public library and school library collaboration as described by the twelve school librarians and eight public librarians in this study. All participant information was kept confidential and statements taken directly from the interviews are presented in quotations. The nature of using phenomenology as a method of analysis requires the meaning to be derived from what the participants say about how they think and feel, rather than what they have done (Bossaller, 2018). Therefore, the findings are presented from what they say in answer to questions about collaboration (even if they do not address collaboration specifically), rather what they have done to collaborate. Four themes (The meaning of collaboration; The role of communication; The dilemma of demonstrating value; and The impact of perceptions and limitations) emerged and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Codes and Themes.

Theme	School Librarian	Public Librarian
The meaning of collaboration	Collaboration domain (within the building) Librarian-teacher collaboration Collaboration is a professional standard Personal benefits of collaborating*	Collaboration domain (within the community) Librarian-teacher collaboration Collaboration should be mutually beneficial *

The role of communication	Starting the partnership Sustaining the partnership Unfamiliarity with other library systems Methods of communication*	Starting the partnership Sustaining the partnership Unfamiliarity with other library systems Dependency on schools to advertise programs*
The dilemma of demonstrating value	Self-sufficiency Making the library relevant Concern for meeting educational standards Mutual benefits	Self-sufficiency Making the library relevant Concern for meeting educational standards Mutual benefits Establishing and meeting goals*
The impact of perceptions and limitations	Developing relationships with new staff Working within the limits of the school schedule Limited by space	Developing relationships with new staff Working within the limits of the school schedule Limited by space

Asterisks (*) denote codes that were unique to each group of librarians

The Meaning of Collaboration

For the school librarian, collaboration is a term they know well. School librarians are often former teachers who have an extensive understanding of collaborating at the building level or with other teachers in the same grade (AASL, 2018). For the school librarian, the AASL *National School Library Standards* include “Collaborate” as a Shared Foundation, and school librarians are encouraged as part of their professional mission to work with teachers in the building to improve student outcomes by aligning curriculum and library resources and services (AASL, 2018). The school librarians in this study addressed collaboration as part of their professional role. Specifically, they indicated that they collaborate a lot already, but mostly with other teachers and administrators in the building. For most of the school librarians in this study, conversations on collaboration led from school and public library collaboration, to the collaboration that they are already doing with their teaching staff and administrators. For example, one school librarian indicated that in addition to collaborating with teachers, they also collaborate with principals. Another indicated that they collaborate with specials teachers. One said, *“In our education classes, we were taught to collaborate with anyone we could find that would help us.”*

Two other school librarians specifically addressed the concept of school and public librarian collaboration as different from the collaboration they do with teachers because it is *“collaborating with other librarians.”* One indicated that when they collaborate with other librarians, it is with other school librarians in the district and not necessarily public librarians, stating, *“Collaborating with the public library is collaborating with librarians not teachers.”* Another said, *“I collaborate a lot but with other librarians in my district, not the public library.”*

Both the school and public librarians thought that collaboration was personally beneficial. For some, collaboration provided a personal benefit in that it gave them new ideas about what was possible. However, when discussing collaboration, two school librarians also described how social media met their needs for engaging with other librarians. One school librarian described how they talk with other librarians on social media to get ideas and discuss problems and solutions. Specifically, they said *“Social media is more flexible and librarians collaborate there.”* Another said, *“Collaboration is good no matter how you do it, but the ideas you get from other people are things you wouldn’t think of yourself. I do a lot of searching on Pinterest for library ideas.”* Several public librarians described collaboration as “mutually beneficial” and explained that if one library was benefitting, the other

should too. One public librarian even explained that he stopped collaborating because he *“felt like a pest”* when asking the school for opportunities to promote events.

Almost all of the school librarians in this study had experiences working with the public library in some capacity. When asked to describe an experience about when they collaborated with the public library, all but two shared coordinated programming examples ranging from large coordinated events like a “Murder Mystery Night” to library card enrollment. However, they didn’t all describe these experiences as collaborating. One school librarian said that when the public librarian had come to the school to present to the students about the summer reading program, “it was more advertising than collaborating.”

The public librarians in this study discussed collaboration in terms of their work within the community. Several public librarians were involved with community activities, such as graduations, notarizing documents, faxing, or serving as polling locations for elections. Most public librarians described how they helped students and teachers as members of the community. In one example, a public librarian helped a student who was locked out of his car, and in another example, a public librarian described how she attended school events like homecoming games. They often talked about knowing everyone in the community and working offsite at Head Start (a preschool service for low-income families) or retirement homes. Also, the public librarians explained that they work with teachers or school counselors often.

The Role of Communication

Starting or continuing a collaboration is initiated by one of the parties in a collaboration. In this study, every school librarian who had been involved in a collaboration chose to identify who initiated the collaboration. The librarian who initiated the collaboration varied from within each institution. Except for one school librarian, the majority of school and public library collaboration was initiated by the public librarians. One school librarian who initiated all collaborative efforts with the public library, said, *“I feel like all of the outreach has been from us to them.”* She also described how she regularly visits the public library to observe their resources to know more about what they have and has approached them with programming ideas, but they have never come to her.

The other school librarians described how the public librarian contacted them with ideas for working together. One said that *“She [the public librarian] sends out emails at the beginning of the year with their story times and she comes into the lower elementary.”* This librarian had regular communication with the public librarian and both went back and forth between libraries as needed for community events, book fairs, or to support kids who visited the library on early out days. Another said that at the beginning of the year, the public librarian will email to request a time to get students set up with library cards to access electronic resources saying, *“The public librarian will email because she wants to get students signed up for e-cards.”* Another school librarian also said, *“the public librarian reached out to us with the “Battle of the Books” program.”*

There was one example of school and public library collaboration where the communication was disruptive to the relationship. Instead of emailing the school librarian to collaborate, the public librarian emailed an administrator instead of the school librarian, who then forwarded it to the school librarian. The school librarian stated that they would have preferred to have been contacted directly, stating *“I wish that we could have sat down together. What are your goals? Here are my goals. Please communicate with me.”* This same school librarian explained that collaborating with the public library required the public librarian to understand boundaries and goals. She explained that *“the school librarian is often stuck with the grunt work”* so it is important for the public librarian to

understand what is involved with the collaboration they request. On the other hand, the public librarians discussed how they work with multiple people within a school and have many contacts there. They might be unsure about who to contact within a school. Each public librarian also talked about how they communicated with teachers, as opposed to school librarians, regularly. Most were contacted by the teachers to provide specific materials or programming related to a curriculum need. The public librarians described the teachers as their patrons and that they worked directly with the teacher.

Several school librarians described their relationships with the public librarians. The longer the relationship, the better the communication and the more likely they were to engage in collaboration with the public library. One school librarian described how a new public librarian came to the area and reached out to collaborate with the school library. That effort led to collaboration related to the programming offered by the two libraries. However, when that public librarian eventually retired, the collaboration ended. Another school librarian said something similar. This participant had experienced collaboration with the public library until the public library staff changed. A public librarian also said that his efforts to collaborate with the schools were thwarted by the changing school library staff in the schools in his area.

This effort from the public librarians to collaborate may be because they feel the schools can help them to advertise and promote programs. The public librarians all described how the schools played a large role in youth attendance at library events, or using library resources. The public librarians described how they need the schools to promote their youth programs. One public librarian specifically said, *"I need the schools to advertise summer reading or I won't have anyone participate."* Another public librarian said that one of their goals is to bring in more teens and that school libraries could help promote that as well.

One last finding related to communication was that both the school and public librarians shared ideas that they had for collaborating with the other the library, but they had not shared these ideas with the other librarian yet. They expressed desires for sharing purchasing or access to niche collections like graphic novel collections, or sharing technology apps like Sora (or Overdrive). Two public librarians specifically said that they cannot afford some of the newer library sources that larger library urban or suburban library systems have, that might appeal to youth specifically, like kindle resources, streaming music or video apps. Several public librarians also addressed how they would like to work with the schools to bring more junior high and high school students to the public library.

The Dilemma of Demonstrating Value

The librarians in this study were concerned with showing the value of their school library to administrators. They recognized that demonstrating the library's impact was an important factor for funding and attaining the resources that they needed. However, all of the school librarians indicated that they were able to do this already without the help of collaborating with the public library. Similarly, while public librarians shared that they wished they had certain things (more resources, more space) they also felt like their budgets were adequate. One public librarian said, *"I've never been denied anything. I never had a feeling that I couldn't have what I needed."* Most school librarians were also satisfied with their budgets, or at least grateful for the resources they had to support their community. One school librarian specifically stated, *"I've never collaborated with the public library. I've never needed to."* This same librarian was even able to attain a grant to meet the needs of students and their families after hours (something that a public library might do) by staying open later in the evenings. Another school librarian said, *"We could use a bigger budget but if I ever needed anything my school would support me."* A different school librarian also said, *"I just didn't think I needed the public*

library as much, but looking back it probably would have been a better experience if I had." Another librarian also said, *"I didn't collaborate as much as I should have because I had all the databases I needed."*

The school librarians in this study recognized that the public library had additional resources that could be valuable to their students. Several school librarians described how it was important for the school librarian to know what the public library offers *"since the kids are part of both communities at different times of the day."* One school librarian said, *"I should learn more about what they have."* Several other school librarians also indicated that they were unaware of what the public library had but commented about the need to look at their resources to see if any might be useful. One school librarian who was involved in resource-sharing with the public library said that it can be problematic for kids to have access to the public libraries full eBook collection. For example, one middle school librarian had a student who wanted to read *Fifty Shades of Gray* which is available in the public library's eBook collection, but is not an item that would be purchased for a school library collection.

The school librarians understood that their student's participation in public library events, programming or circulation was beneficial to the students, but was also critical for demonstrating the public library's impact. One school librarian explained that collaborating with the public library made it so that her students were able to have access to some of the most popular books that they only had limited access to in the school. In fact, one school librarian described how their school's use of the eBook collection increased public library check out's so much that the public library had to redo their license with the eBook company. The school librarian described this as a way that the public library could show value (e.g., circulation statistics) but also spoke with pride as she described her student's access to the books that they loved to read.

The librarians in this study also discussed the importance of meeting state educational standards. Several public librarians explained that they had a program that had not been supported by the local schools because the program did not meet state educational standards. The public librarians discussed this as if they understood the school's position, but expressed that they were restricted to use the programs adopted by the public library system. They were unable to make changes to the program so that it would meet standards. However, even though they understood, they felt like the library programs had value that may not be understood by the school system. It is important to note that the public librarians felt the school librarian understood the value, but the school system and its administrators prevented the programming from happening. However, most of the public librarians in the study talked about thriving programs where they brought in speakers from the community, received grants for author visits or used innovative services. Many of these programs were still promoted within the schools.

For several librarians, the relationship between them was mutually beneficial for the students. Both the school and public librarians within each area discussed how the libraries provided resources for students that they needed. One public librarian described how the library and schools were essential for providing internet services to families. She said, *"We are rural and there are so many kids that [sic] don't have wifi at home and depend on the school or library to provide that service."* The school librarian in this area also explained how the students in her school use the public library as a source for Internet when school is not in session.

The Impact of Perceptions and Limitations

While the school librarians described the collaboration that they had experienced, they also described reasons that they could not collaborate as much as they wanted. For example, several

school librarians described their rural setting as prohibitive for collaboration across institutions for various reasons. One explained that there was more collaboration in bigger cities because the libraries there have bigger budgets and more staff to be able to do more. Another school librarian explained that the distance between the school and the public library was prohibitive for collaboration, and that schools that were closer to a public library would collaborate more. In an effort to visit a public library, two school librarians had arranged field trips to take their students to the public library, one even bussing the children 90 minutes to visit the largest one in the area.

The school librarians in this study also perceived public librarians to have more freedom and flexibility in their job. One public librarian explained that she also felt that this was true. She said, *"I know that I have more time and flexibility than the school librarians so I work around their schedule."* All of the school librarians in this study described how they were scheduled for the entire day with little time for doing anything outside of the building. One said, *"I get so busy, and if I have 30 kids in the room, I can't leave them."* Several school librarians explained that if school and public library collaboration were to happen, that the public librarian would need to come to the school since their schedules were so restrictive. In addition, one indicated that her plan time had been reduced this year so there was very little time that she could leave the school to collaborate with the public librarian. She said, *"My PLC time only allows me time to leave the library on Fridays."* Another said, *"My schedule keeps me from trying different things."* Another said, *"I would like to do more, but my day goes crazy fast and I can't do as much as I would like to."*

One school librarian explained that the nature of the public library itself has more flexibility to engage in a variety of activities like collaboration. For one, many of the school librarians perceived the public library to have a larger budget and staff just for outreach. One specifically stated that *"Public libraries usually have a better budget than schools."* One school librarian suggested that school librarians with small budgets could go to the public library and say, *"I want to do this but I don't have any money"* to start a collaboration. Another said, *"The public library has a lot more freedom,"* and specified that the public library is not restricted to age appropriate or curriculum related resources. One example provided by this school librarian was that a school librarian needs to ensure children do not access resources with adult content.

Changes in library staffing was discussed as a problem for collaboration by both school and public librarians. If a collaborative partnership had been established, but one of the librarian's changed jobs, retired or left the library, then the collaboration ended. One public librarian said, *"Even if you have individuals that collaborate, that collaboration may die when one moves away or retires."* Another school librarian explained that budget cuts had forced them to eliminate some positions and that one of the school libraries in the district went unstaffed for a while or was staffed with someone who was not a professional librarian. During that time, there was not any collaboration.

The public librarians also expressed challenges working with the school schedules. To work with the students in the schools, the timing had to be just right. One public librarian described how she figured out a way to start a program at the school, then relocate the students to the public library to complete the program when the school day ended. Unless the public librarian's speak to all the students in a general assembly, then the public librarian would need to visit multiple classes throughout the day. One school librarian explained, *"It would be very hard for a public librarian to talk to all our classes. They would need to come all day."* One public librarian did this by coming to the school on the day that sixth graders registered for classes and received their tablets. This public librarian sat with the school librarian and signed students with parent consent up for a public library card. Another public librarian would come to the school to conduct a story time for the lower elementary. One school librarian had a solution for this: the public library would host a breakfast for school

librarians when the school year ended so that they could communicate and find time to spend together.

Discussion

Descriptions of Collaboration

The school and public librarians in this study described collaboration as a mutually beneficial practice that supports students. The librarians casually talked about their relationships and collaborative activities with the other library in their area, even though they had all been involved in interesting partnerships, many of which appear on the ALSC (n.d.) list of school/public cooperative programs, like providing educational library cards, or summer reading and learning. Both school and public librarians described collaboration as occasions when both worked to meet the same goal. For example, some public librarians often described collaborations with the school, and not just the school librarian individually. Those who had worked with school librarians were able to describe specific collaborations related to sharing resources, increasing access or expanding programming. The public librarians felt that they supported the students in their community in many ways, though not necessarily through partnerships with the school library. The public librarians also were dependent on the schools to promote public library programming, which every school librarian in this study supported in some way in their schools.

Another major finding of this study is that school and public librarians support each other's libraries and describe that as a collaborative experience. The public librarians support students and teachers, even when the school librarian is not involved. Martinez (2008) explained that outreach is part of the mission of the public library and many public librarians will work with students and teachers after school hours. School librarians may not be aware of all of the interactions that the public librarian has with students and teachers unless there is strong communication between them. In this study, the most sustained partnerships happened between librarians who emailed, talked on the phone and saw each other in person in the community. Only one pair of librarians in this study mentioned that they arranged planned meetings or made intentional efforts to meet in more formal settings. Similarly, the school librarians in this study were often aware of the resources and programs offered in the public library and shared those with their students and teachers, even if the public librarian was not aware that the school librarian was promoting them.

The Experience of Collaboration

The school and public librarian's experience of collaboration was not linear, but was instead often described as an informal and fluid relationship that occurred from living within the same community. One finding of this study was that "collaboration" cannot be restricted to semantics and definitions. When asked about collaboration, the librarians in this study did not describe levels of collaboration or did not explain which level of collaboration their practices fell into. Instead, they described the value of working together and serving the same patrons. The partnership or relationship added to their work, including making things better for students, or giving the librarians new ideas. Some even referred to experiences they had on social media with librarians they had never met. Others described collaboration as working independently to serve the same people. This is not true collaboration as defined by Montiel-Overall (2010) or Mattessich and Monsey (1992), but helps us to understand that the librarians in this study valued the opportunity to interact

with other librarians to get new ideas and solve problems. They also valued meeting the needs of the patrons in the community.

Almost all collaborative experiences were described positively in this study. Many described their collaborations as supportive of each other. They reflected positively on interactions that had occurred with the other librarian in the past. Most librarians wished for more collaboration than what they already had accomplished. For those who spoke highly of their collaborative experiences, they often had a strong relationship with the other librarian that had been developed over many years. Others described how change of staffing ended collaboration. It is important to reiterate that one finding of this study is that both school and public librarians did not limit their experiences of collaboration to meetings or physical interactions with the other librarian. Instead, all librarians described experiences of collaboration as supporting patrons who may benefit from access to the other library.

Similarities and Differences Between School and Public Librarians

There were several areas in which school and public librarians expressed challenges due to the differences in their institutions. Both the school and public librarians agreed they had similar missions and goals for supporting student literacy and learning. However, the differences in their working environment was prohibitive for collaboration. While the librarians had developed working relationships with each other, many felt that what they could accomplish was restricted by systemic issues related to the demands placed on the school librarian by the school system. School librarians and their students had less flexibility to leave the school and public library programming needed to meet educational standards to be considered of value to school administrators. Both school and public librarians in this study indicated that collaboration was hard to sustain due to the school librarian's busy schedule. Also, the collaboration itself was not necessarily essential for the school librarians in their daily duties, and served more as supplemental projects, whereas the public librarians felt that working with the school was more valuable to them. The school librarians described how the public library partnerships had increased resources for kids, including access to materials and programming. One surprising finding was that both the school and public librarians indicated that they were happy with their budget but that the public library was perceived to have more resources, staff and funding. The school librarians were willing to support the public librarians in promoting these resources, including programming, books and electronic resources, to the students in their school, seeing them as beneficial to the children.

Lastly, each librarian expressed a lack of familiarity with the system in which the other librarian worked. For example, the public librarian might be confused about who to contact within the school, or what the current educational standards are. The school librarian might be unsure of new resources or programming in the public library, or how decisions were made. Both librarians explained that they did not understand how the other showed value to their administrations, and made guesses about what the other deemed important. Pandora and Hayman (2013) explained that learning about the policies, practices, and environment of the other institution was critical for ensuring successful and sustained collaborative partnerships with other libraries.

Recommendations

The first recommendation for school and public librarians in rural areas who wish to develop collaborative relationships is to establish creative ways of communicating. The school librarians in this study collaborated heavily within their buildings, but were affected by the systematic constraints of their job which required them to be present in their buildings for most of the work

day. Most of the school librarians made significant efforts to communicate or stay in touch with what was happening at the public library. The same is true of the public librarians. Public librarians made efforts to understand school scheduling, standards requirement and student needs. Also, public librarians were often more involved with the school, teachers or students than the school librarian realized. Regular communication, both formal and informal, could support both librarians and work to develop sustained collaborative partnerships. Email, phone, social media, in-person meetings or visit, and even web conferencing may be ways that school and public librarians can communicate within the constraints of the school librarian's schedule.

One of the concerns for public librarians was providing programming that met state educational standards. Having a program that was perceived to not meet the standards impacted the ability for the public librarians to collaborate with the schools. This might be an opportunity for the school librarians to advocate for the public libraries, either by helping administrators to make the connection between state educational standards and public library programming, or by working with the public library's administration to adopt programming that is more aligned with current standards and educational practices.

Next, librarians may wish to use models of collaborative partnerships as guides for sustaining collaboration (Dankowski, 2018). These models stem from the business field and suggest that partnerships can include 50/50 partnerships (where the libraries share planning, resources training, etc.), intensive partnerships (where one library does the majority of the efforts), or passive programming (where the partners simply communicate with each other rather than sharing resources, money or time). In addition, the Gallup approach (Giesecke, 2012; Wagner & Muller, 2009) approach, i.e., common mission, fairness, trust, acceptance, forgiveness, communication and unselfishness, provides a framework for two professionals who are working together. School and public librarians may wish to apply this framework to ensure successful and sustained partnerships with the other librarian in their area.

Issues of changing staff who are involved in collaborative partnerships may be solved through strategic planning. Creating a procedural manual for one librarian to pass on to their predecessor may be one way to document past collaboration, as well as what is known about the other institution (e.g., contacts, policies, schedules). Also, for libraries that operate with one librarian, an advisory board may be able to serve as a source of support and institutional knowledge. If the librarians change, the advisory board members may remain the same and have information to pass on to new hires related to collaborative practice. School and public librarians can also advocate for each other as needed by supporting the other through funding, procedural or policy changes.

Lastly, organizational culture plays a role in successful and sustained collaboration. School administrators can learn more about the public library to support school and public collaboration within the school. If school administrators were to design flexible scheduling for school librarians and provide staffing assistance, school librarians may have more flexibility to develop collaborative partnerships with the public library without working overtime. Even though rural public libraries may not have outreach librarians or even multiple librarians in one building, there may be strategies for prioritizing relationships with the schools, such as inviting school professionals to serve on the public library board, or inviting school professionals to library training. Public library directors may wish to assign a school liaison to work with the schools specifically to support needs and address challenges. The public library's school liaison could stay abreast of curriculum, standards and school library resources, as well as serve as a primary contact.

Conclusions and Implications

Collaboration between school and public libraries can be beneficial to each institution, though it is not always easy to form lasting collaborative partnerships. This study used phenomenology to understand more about how school and public librarians in a rural area of the Midwest experience collaboration. All of the librarians had experienced collaboration, or considered it, with libraries in their area and described their experiences as beneficial to students. Through a phenomenological analysis, several themes emerged including the variety of ways that librarians described collaboration, and the role of communication in that collaboration. In addition, most of the librarians described the challenges of working within their own, and the others', systems to collaborate. School librarians also faced many limitations to collaborating with public librarians, including lack of flexibility and time, and felt that it is easier for the public library to lead the collaboration. The findings of this study indicate that school and public librarians in this rural area are indeed collaborating, and value it, but are limited by their availability and resources.

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Author Note

Jenna Kammer is an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Missouri. She is currently an educator of school librarians. She also previously worked in public and academic libraries.

Denise Moreland is a graduate student at the University of Central Missouri. She previously worked as an adult reference librarian at a public library.